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How to cite:

Xiao, Junhong and (2007). Language Learning Strategies in Distance English Learning: A Study of Learners at Shantou Radio and Television University, China. *Journal of Asia TEFL*, 4(2) pp. 141–164.

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Language Learning Strategies in Distance English Learning: A Study of Learners at Shantou Radio and Television University, China

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Distance language learners require new kinds of skills, motivation and commitment to work effectively in a learning setting that is largely new and unfamiliar to them, and which is likely to have a direct impact on their development and use of learning strategies (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995; White, 2004). This paper is based on a study of a group of Chinese students learning English at a distance at Shantou Radio and Television University, China, and investigates their use of language learning strategies. The study found that distance English learners in China are gradually shifting from dependence on teachers to a more autonomous approach to learning. In many cases they are beginning to deploy a variety of strategies to facilitate their learning, and at the same time taking more responsibility for their studies. This appears to challenge the traditional stereotype of the dependent, 'spoon-fed' Chinese language learner as portrayed in previous studies. The paper concludes that learner training should be integrated into the instructional design of the materials in order to enhance strategy awareness and emphasize the facilitative role of learning strategies in language study.

Key words: distance learning, learning strategy, autonomous learning

INTRODUCTION

Language learning strategies have been high on the research agenda for over 30 years since the publication of Rubin's pioneering work in 1975. In China, Huang and Van Naerssen (1985) were the first to investigate strategies employed by Chinese learners of English. Nevertheless, a review of the literature shows that in China research in this field has mostly centered on students in conventional learning settings and that very little work has been done that addresses the specific situation of distance language learning, although the number of distance language learners has been on the rise in recent years (Xiao, 2007). There have been over 60,000 students enrolled on English programs leading to junior college diploma and undergraduate diploma/BA degree each academic year in China's Radio and Television Universities alone since 2000 (China Central Radio and Television University Education Information Management Center, 2007). In a cross-cultural study of distance language learners in China and the UK, Hurd and Xiao (2006) include a section on learning strategies. Wang (2006) investigates learning strategies used by non-English majors at Shanghai Television University, China. However, other than these two studies, research into language learning strategies in the Chinese distance context is scant and anecdotal, hence the need for further research.

This paper aims to extend knowledge of the learning strategies used by Chinese distance learners of English. It addresses the use of learning strategies based on the findings of questionnaires administered to 218 Chinese students at Shantou Radio and Television University (SRTVU), a metropolitan wing of China's Open University—China Central Radio and Television University. To initiate the study, the following research questions were established:

- 1) What types of strategies do SRTVU students use and how frequently?
- 2) To what extent does experience of distance English learning influence strategy use?

- 3) What are the implications for improving English language teaching and learning in China's context?

BACKGROUND

The SRTVU Learning Context

The BA in English has been part of undergraduate provision at SRTVU since 2000. It consists of two modules: a general module with the emphasis on English language proficiency for the first two years of the study, and a specialized module to cater for students' professional needs in the final year. The course books, specially prepared for the program, are thematically structured, and integrate all language skills within the activities or tasks. Audio-visual materials are part of the materials, with web resources available on most courses. A *Guide to Success* is also provided to help students adapt to the new mode of learning and develop a more autonomous approach to their studies. Students can attend optional face-to-face tutorials two hours each week if they wish. They are also encouraged to contact their tutors by phone, e-mail or the course website if they need help, and are strongly advised to participate in online conferences (which are compulsory for some courses) or join self-help groups for extra practice or collaborative learning activities.

The SRTVU Student Profile

Students at SRTVU are typical distance learners with work and/or family commitments (Niu, Xiao, Wang & He, 2005). They appreciate the flexibility and autonomy provided by the distance-taught programme which enables them to juggle their social roles, career commitments and family obligations (Xiao, 2004a). Normally, students are required to have completed a Junior College Diploma programme in English before formally enrolling. Otherwise,

they must pass a compulsory English test to prove that their English is well above the required level. Supported distance learning does not reflect the traditional Chinese learning culture of ‘spoon-feeding’ and total reliance on the teacher (Xiao, 2004b), and is therefore an unfamiliar and to many an uncomfortable way of learning. The demands of a learning mode in which autonomy is an integral part can be overwhelming for many students, despite the various forms of support on offer.

METHOD

Participants

The study involved 173 learners of English at SRTVU currently enrolled on all three years of the BA programme including 50 in their first year, and 45 graduates who had just completed their studies (n=218) (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
The SRTVU Student Profile

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Graduates	Total
Number	50	63	60	45	218

Procedure

A variety of classifications of language learning strategies can be found in the research literature (Cohen, 2000; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). For our study, we adopted Oxford’s (1990) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL), and developed our questionnaire within the framework of the ESL/EFL version of SILL, taking into consideration the learning context and cultural background of the participants and other literature on the subject (Ellis, 1999a, 1999b; Gardner & Miller, 2002; Hurd & Xiao, 2006; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1999a, 1999b; Williams & Burden, 2000) in order to reflect more closely the ways in which Chinese distance learners

study English. Like SILL, the questionnaire contained six subscales of strategies (memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social) with a total of 60 items, and offered a choice of five Likert-scale responses for each strategy described: 1=never or almost never true of me, 2=generally not true of me, 3=sometimes true of me, 4=generally true of me, and 5=always or almost always true of me. According to Oxford (1990), the first three subscales (i.e. memory, cognitive and compensation) are direct strategies in that they 'require mental processing of the language' and so 'directly involve the target language' (p. 37). In contrast, the last three subscales (i.e. metacognitive, affective and social) are indirect strategies because they 'provide indirect support for language learning through focusing, planning, evaluating, seeking opportunities, controlling anxiety, increasing cooperation and empathy and other means' (p. 151).

The questionnaire was distributed at tutorials to the undergraduate students and by e-mail to the graduates two months after the start of the 2006 academic year. The response rates were high in both cases, 87.8% (undergraduates) and 75% (graduates).

The data were processed using SPSS to calculate the Cronbach alpha as the reliability index. Following SILL, reliability was determined using the whole instrument rather than the subscales. The results showed high reliability at .883.

FINDINGS

To interpret the strategy frequency, we followed Schmenk, Schulze and Hamann's (2005) scale. That is, averages of 4.0—5.0 were considered exceptionally high strategy use; averages of 2.1—3.9 were regarded as medium and averages of 1.0—2.0 were designated as exceptionally low.

Overall Strategy Frequency

Overall, the SRTVU students' use of learning strategies was towards the medium high end (3.2268); the frequency increased, albeit not very significantly, as students progressed through their studies (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
Overall Strategy Frequency

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Metacognitive	Affective	Social	Average
Year 1	2.8324	3.1587	2.7974	3.1215	3.3724	3.2289	3.0852
Year 2	2.9071	3.2107	2.9074	3.2560	3.6100	3.5203	3.2352
Year 3	2.9967	3.3655	3.1388	3.2727	3.5476	3.5004	3.3336
Graduates	3.1688	3.3844	3.1416	3.3636	3.6360	3.5777	3.3776
All	2.9473	3.2603	2.9799	3.1916	3.5423	3.4396	3.2268

As regards the subscales, affective and social strategies proved more popular than other strategies, with results towards the high end of the medium continuum (3.5423 and 3.4396 respectively); next came cognitive and metacognitive strategies (3.2603 and 3.1916 respectively), followed by compensation and memory strategies (2.9799 and 2.9473).

The mastery of learning strategies cannot be achieved overnight; comparisons were therefore made between 1st year students (n=50) and graduates (n=45) to see whether experience of distance learning among the latter group had had any impact on strategy use.

Memory Strategies

None of the memory strategies were used with high frequency by the SRTVU students as a whole, but with regard to specific groups, Item 7—‘I remember new English words by repeating and memorizing them’— was frequently used by 1st year students (4.1764) in contrast to its use by graduates which was at the top end of the medium continuum (3.9545). With the exception of Item 7, the average rating of the other strategies was 0.3983 higher for graduates than for 1st year students (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
The Use of Memory Strategies

Strategies	Rank	All	Year 1	Graduates
I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.	6	2.9843	2.7251	3.4000
I remember new English words by playing word games or using mnemonics, for example, recalling words with the same endings or rhyming endings, antonyms, synonyms, etc.	7	2.5687	2.5333	2.7556
I place new English words in a group with other words of the same theme (for example, words related to clothing, or foods).	8	2.5670	2.4368	2.7778
I remember new English words by analyzing their structure (prefix, suffix, etc.).	2	3.4559	3.4470	3.8000
I remember new English words by their collocations.	3	3.2855	3.1167	3.3111
I physically act out new English words.	10	2.1070	1.7778	2.2444
I remember new English words by repeating and memorizing them.	1	3.9071	4.1764	3.9545
I review English lessons often.	5	3.0984	3.2166	3.2667
I list new English words or write them down on flashcards and regularly test them.	9	2.3021	1.9032	2.5333
I make special efforts to remember new English words.	4	3.1973	2.9914	3.6444
Average		2.9473	2.8324	3.1688

Note: all (n=218), Year 1 (n=50), and graduates (n=45). The same applies to Tables 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8.

In the memory subscale, Items 7, 4, 5 and 8 in decreasing order have always been encouraged in China's English language teaching (ELT) system and have also proved to be effective in facilitating vocabulary acquisition (Dai & Wang, 2002). It was not surprising, therefore, that they were used more frequently than the other strategies. Of the four strategies, 1st year students used Item 7 slightly more frequently than graduates, but the other three items slightly less frequently. This may be due to the fact that graduates have more memory strategies at their disposal and so are less reliant on repeating and memorizing. Another more frequently used strategy was Item 10—'I make special efforts to remember new English words'—which 1st year students used less often than graduates, possibly because the first year course

materials are fairly simple and straightforward and there are therefore not many new words to learn. The remaining strategies were used less frequently—towards the lower end of the medium continuum. Items 1, 2, 3 and 6 require students to adopt less mechanical but more rational approaches to remembering new words. However, except for Item 1—‘I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them’—neither graduates nor 1st year students made frequent use of these strategies despite the benefits they can bring for acquiring and consolidating new vocabulary. The same finding emerged for Item 9—‘I list new English words or write them down on flashcards and regularly test them’—the use of which was relatively low for graduates (2.5333) but exceptionally low for 1st year students (1.9032). Item 9 is a mechanical strategy which can be valuable to distance learners who have to take on multiple roles in routine life and therefore have to make the best use of whatever bit of time is available for study.

Cognitive Strategies

None of the cognitive strategies were used overall with high frequency with the exception of Item 8 which was popular with both graduates (4.0222) and 1st year students (3.9531). On average, the strategies were rated 0.2257 higher by graduates than 1st year students (see Table 4).

TABLE 4
The Use of Cognitive Strategies

Strategies	Rank	All	Year 1	Graduates
I practice the sounds of English by repeating them after recordings.	13	3.0652	2.9857	3.2955
I watch English TV programs and English films or listen to English radio programs.	8	3.4146	3.3763	3.5333
I can listen for gist or for specific information /I do not attempt to understand every word all the time.	10	3.3445	3.3281	3.4444
I try to talk like native English speakers by observing and imitating their tone as well as body language.	11	3.1758	3.0156	3.2000

I pay more attention to meaning than accuracy in speaking and writing.	9	3.3791	3.0694	3.2667
I record myself speaking and try to learn from this practice.	16	1.8885	1.8127	1.8864
I can read for gist or for specific information /I do not attempt to understand every word all the time.	7	3.4487	3.1296	3.7500
I use information from the context or existing world knowledge to improve listening and reading comprehension.	1	3.8749	3.9531	4.0222
I make use of grammatical rules (such as logical connectors, uses of tenses, mood, voices, articles, etc) and generic structures to improve my listening and reading comprehension.	14	3.0615	2.9840	3.2045
I try to use set expressions (phrases and sentences) when I write.	2	3.7010	3.5937	3.6818
I check my writing for grammatical accuracy, vocabulary usage, originality, consistency, and use of generic structure.	5	3.5197	3.2968	3.7955
I memorize dialogues and texts.	15	2.4679	2.5729	2.6222
I consult reference materials such as grammar books or dictionaries to help me practise English.	3	3.6993	3.6378	3.6444
I try to work out the rules of English myself, consult reference materials or ask for help when I come across difficult language points.	4	3.5604	3.5955	3.6000
I try to understand what I have heard or read without translating it word-for-word into my own language.	6	3.4604	3.3934	3.7273
I do not think in Chinese of what I am going to say or write in English.	12	3.1039	2.7954	3.4773
Average		3.2603	3.1587	3.3844

Overall, the SRTVU students' use of cognitive strategies, except for Item 6 (1.8885), was in the medium range and graduates used cognitive strategies more often, though not significantly so, than 1st year students. Although it is argued that Item 12—'I memorize dialogues and texts'—can also help improve language learning (Ellis, 1999a, p. 167), students' use of this strategy (2.4679) was relatively low in frequency for both cohorts (1st year

students 2.5729; graduates 2.6222). Moreover, Item 6—‘I record myself speaking and try to learn from this practice’— was very seldom used by the SRTVU students: 1.8885 (all); 1.8127 (1st year students); 1.8864 (graduates). A possible explanation is that these strategies are time-consuming and in the case of Item 12 put great demands on memory. Distance learners in China are pressed for time in the majority of cases (Niu, *et al*, 2005). Furthermore, Chinese students of English at tertiary level tend not to favour strategies involving learning by rote (Dai & Wang, 2002), and distance English learners are no exception. The frequency of use of Item 16—‘I do not think in Chinese of what I am going to say or write in English’ was 3.1039, in the medium range, indicating that the students still rely on their mother tongue to a considerable extent. With regard to both productive and receptive activities it would appear that as Chinese students acquire higher proficiency in English, they refer less often to their mother-tongue.

Compensation Strategies

The use of compensation strategies reflected that of cognitive strategies in that none were used with high frequency by the SRTVU students, apart from Item 4 which was popular with graduates (4.1333). They used positive compensation strategies more frequently than 1st year students but negative ones less often.

TABLE 5
The Use of Compensation Strategies

Strategies	Rank	All	Year 1	Graduates
To understand new English words, I make guesses.	2	3.6302	3.2467	3.5333
I do not look up every new word in dictionaries.	3	3.3108	3.1776	3.5111
When I can't think of a word in English, I use gestures.	4	3.0717	2.7648	3.8667
When I can't think of a word in English, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	1	3.9611	3.7483	4.1333

When I can't think of a word in English, I use its Chinese equivalent.	7	2.5861	2.5411	2.4889
When I can't think of a word in English, I make up a new one.	8	2.0073	1.2991	2.6889
When I do not understand what the other person is saying, I pretend that I understand to keep the conversation going.	5	2.6638	2.8238	2.6444
If I cannot express myself clearly and accurately in English, I give up the attempt.	6	2.6086	2.7779	2.2667
Average		2.9799	2.7974	3.1416

In this subscale, Items 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 are positive strategies while Items 5, 7 and 8 are negative strategies (see Table 5). Students (including graduates in this case whose English is far from native-speaker proficiency level) are bound to experience difficulties because their English is still at the interlanguage stage. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that they use positive strategies in order to compensate for their lack of fluency in English. Students at SRTVU used a variety of compensation strategies with an average frequency of 3.1962 for positive strategies, which was encouraging. Graduates tended to use more than 1st year students (3.5466; 2.8473). Interestingly, Item 6—‘when I can’t think of a word in English, I make up a new one’—was very seldom used (2.0073) although again it was a more popular choice with graduates (2.6889) than 1st year students (1.2991). A likely explanation is that this strategy requires a good command of English, and so its use is directly related to proficiency level. Graduates used fewer negative compensation strategies (Items 5, 7 and 8) than 1st year students (2.4666; 2.7142), which could be related to their greater experience of distance language learning. It is also indicative of the need for measures to reduce the reliance of students as a whole on these strategies so that they could improve their communicative competence.

Metacognitive Strategies

None of the metacognitive strategies were used with high frequency by the SRTVU students. With the exception of Item 5, the average rating of

strategies was 0.2859 higher for graduates than for 1st year students (see Table 6).

TABLE 6
The Use of Metacognitive Strategies

Strategies	Rank	All	Year 1	Graduates
I try to concentrate on what I am reading or hearing and put unrelated topics out of my mind. / I make notes to help concentration.	8	3.1027	3.6180	3.6591
I clearly identify the purpose of an activity; for instance, in a listening task I might need to listen for the general idea or for specific facts.	1	3.5894	3.5128	3.8409
I notice my English mistakes, list them separately and return to the list at intervals to check on progress / I do not assume that language problems will sort themselves out in time.	9	2.6634	2.4149	2.6136
I try to find out how to be a better learner of English by reflecting on which learning techniques work best for me and make a point of reusing them.	2	3.4613	3.0989	3.8182
I arrange my schedule to study and practice English consistently, not just when there is the pressure of a test.	4	3.3526	3.4930	3.3409
I try to look for language practice opportunities, talking, listening, reading and writing as much as possible in English.	7	3.2765	3.2014	3.6136
I have clear goals for improving my English.	3	3.4286	3.2795	3.2955
I think about my progress in learning English.	5	3.3211	3.3628	3.4091
I keep a log of all course-based activities that have been completed.	10	2.4363	2.2274	2.4773
I try to make use of the facilitative roles of ICT in learning English at a distance.	6	3.2841	3.0066	3.5682
Average		3.1916	3.1215	3.3636

In this subscale, apart from Items 3 and 9 whose use was at the lower end of medium frequency, all the other strategies were rated towards the medium high end. Metacognitive strategies play an important role in distance learning (Cohen, 2000; Hurd, 2000; Hurd & Xiao, 2006; White 1999; Williams &

Burden, 2000). It is therefore important that students develop metacognitive competence. Results indicated that overall, SRTVU students were able to focus on the task in hand, put unrelated topics out of their minds (Item 1) and schedule their time to meet different obligations and commitments (Item 5). They had clear goals for improving English (Item 7) and tried to evaluate their own progress (Item 8). In addition, they clearly identified the purpose of an activity (Item 2) and sought out language practice opportunities (Item 6), including making use of the facilitative role of ICT in learning English (Item 10). They also had good powers of critical reflection with respect to the way they learn English (Item 4). In contrast, noticing and dealing with errors (Item 3) and logging course-based activities (Item 9) were used with relatively low frequency.

Affective Strategies

The affective strategy used with the highest frequency was Item 6—‘I am willing to accept constructive criticism’. Compared with graduates (4.2667), 1st year students (4.2916) appeared to be slightly more open to constructive criticism. Apart from this, the average rating of the other strategies was 0.2956 higher for graduates than for 1st year students (see Table 7).

TABLE 7
The Use of Affective Strategies

Strategies	Rank	All	Year 1	Graduates
I am confident that I can learn English well.	2	3.9174	3.7888	3.9778
I attempt to outdo others even when I find that they do better than me.	5	3.7403	3.5729	3.8372
I am uninhibited about my own weaknesses in English.	3	3.8586	3.7361	3.9111
I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.	6	3.5608	3.4113	3.7556
I encourage myself to use English and am willing to risk making mistakes.	4	3.7616	3.7291	3.7727
I am willing to accept constructive criticism.	1	4.3352	4.2916	4.2667
I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.	10	2.6565	2.2830	2.9333

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I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.	8	3.2141	2.9236	3.1333
I do not get easily demotivated if I don't understand something or if I get a bad mark.	9	2.9407	2.6093	3.0682
I feel at ease when using ICT in my English studies.	7	3.4380	3.3785	3.7045
Average		3.5423	3.3724	3.6360

Language learning not only involves cognitive activities but also has an important affective dimension which includes social interaction (Williams & Burden, 2000). Distance learners may be more readily affected by negative emotions; for example, they may be inhibited by feelings of alienation and frustration due to separation from tutors and/or other learners (O'Regan, 2003; Wegerif, 1998; White, 2003; Xiao, 2006). Of the strategies in this subscale, only Items 9 (2.9407) and 7 (2.6565) were rated to be toward the lower end of the medium continuum, with Item 7 more towards the lower end. All the other strategies were used with higher frequency, indicating that SRTVU students were confident in their learning of English (Item 1). They attempted to outdo others, instead of being overwhelmed, even if they found they were not as good at English as their peers (Items 2 and 3); they were not afraid of making mistakes (Item 5) and knew how to relax or reduce their anxiety under pressure (Items 4 and 8). Moreover, they made use of ICT in their English studies (Item 10), which is also an effective way to compensate for the lack of conventional support systems in distance learning. Xiao (2004a, 2006) found that ICT could promote student-instructor interaction as well as peer interaction, not only in academic terms for language practice, but also affectively for mutual support. In terms of motivation, the findings revealed that students were more likely to get demotivated if they did not understand something or got a bad mark (Item 9). However, graduates in this study fared better in this aspect than 1st year students. Item 7 produced a similar finding concerning the use of a rewards system: graduates used this strategy more frequently than 1st year students, although neither cohort reported high frequency use (2.9333 vs. 2.2830).

Social Strategies

None of the social strategies were used with high frequency with the exception of Item 4 which was frequently used by graduates (4.1591). The average rating for all the strategies was 0.3488 higher for graduates than for 1st year students (see Table 8).

TABLE 8
The Use of Social Strategies

Strategies	Rank	All	Year 1	Graduates
I am good at taking the initiative, for example, starting conversations.	6	2.9428	2.7673	3.0682
I work with other learners to practise, review, or share information.	5	3.1173	2.8548	3.2093
I have a strong desire to communicate in English with others, especially English native speakers, in real life.	3	3.5241	3.4079	3.7045
If I do not understand what I hear, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	1	3.9087	3.8159	4.1591
I try to learn about the culture of English countries.	2	3.6541	3.3125	3.6512
I try to make use of the Internet to practice using English, for example, searching for information, writing emails, posting at BBS or chatting online.	4	3.4907	3.2153	3.6744
Average		3.4396	3.2289	3.5777

Use of all the strategies in this subscale was across the medium range. According to Williams and Burden (2000), 'learning a language involves communicating with other people and therefore requires not only suitable cognitive skills but also certain social and communicative skills.' (p. 149). It is, therefore, important to have a strong desire to interact in English (Item 3), to communicate accurately (Item 4), and to be culturally aware (Item 5). Communication via the Internet is common place today and of particular relevance to the distance learning setting (Item 6) where students are learning in a solo environment without conventional support systems. For distance

learners, studying with others is also valuable in order to compensate for the lack of tutor contact and language practice (Item 2). Taking the initiative in starting up conversations in order to practice speaking English (Item 1) is another very important strategy, especially in the Chinese context with its learning culture of dependency. Graduates (3.0682) used this strategy more frequently than 1st year students (2.7673). The overall rating (2.9428) was lower than for the other strategies, but given that the Chinese students are often stereotyped as passive and reticent learners, SRTVU students seemed to be unexpectedly willing to take an active part in their learning.

DISCUSSION

In general, the findings showed that students at SRTVU used a number of strategies relevant to their English studies, although wider and more frequent strategy use would be desirable in order to make their learning more effective (Cohen, 2000). The distance learning experiences of graduates were shown to have a positive influence on their use of learning strategies but not to a significant extent, as can be seen from the comparisons between 1st year students and graduates. There are two possible explanations for this lack of significant improvement in the use of learning strategies. One is that the *Guide to Success*, mentioned earlier, may not be as 'successful' as it is intended to be in terms of giving students the support that they need. Students are left to their own devices in studying the course and are required only to write a study report which takes the place of an examination. There are no formative or staged assessments to check their progress. The other explanation could be that learning strategy training is not integrated into the instructional design for individual courses as an essential and integral component. Over twenty years' experience of teaching English to adults in China convinces us of the naivety of expecting Chinese students to study a course completely on their own: the majority cannot live up to this expectation without considerable levels of support. Therefore, tutorials need

to be arranged to help them digest new ideas better and employ a wider range of strategies related to learning a language in distance mode. It would also be worth experimenting with a version of the strategy-based mode of teaching described by Cohen (2000), since according to Logan and Moore (2004) ‘...learner training is important and needs to be taught.’ (p. 1). Raising awareness of strategy use in a conscious and interventionist manner might be of considerable benefit to Chinese distance language learning students. But as Ellis (1996b) rightly points out, ‘caution must be exercised in drawing conclusions from the research that has investigated the relationship between learning strategies and L2 development.’ (p. 555).

As Stern (1999b) states, ‘...language learning always presents problems of memory, and efficient memorization is indeed a necessary part of deliberate language learning.’ (p. 264). In this respect, SRTVU students appear to rely on those strategies which have always been emphasized in China’s ELT, as evidenced by the findings relating to Items 4, 5, 7 and 8 in the subscale of memory strategies (see Table 3). On the other hand, they might also benefit from more intellectual memory strategies, taking full advantage of their more mature cognition and intelligence. Mechanical memory strategies such as Item 9 can complement intellectual strategies at times when the time available for study is very short. Although graduates used memory strategies slightly more frequently than 1st year students (3.1688; 2.8324), there was no substantial difference in their use by either group. The frequency use of memory strategies in the middle of the medium continuum (2.9473) may be due to lack of vocabulary teaching in the BA courses: very few activities are vocabulary-based. This situation needs to be improved by integrating vocabulary building into the general module courses.

As the findings suggest, of the 16 cognitive strategies listed, all were used with relatively high frequency except for Item 12 which was at the lower end of the medium range and Item 6 which was very seldom used (see Table 4). Metacognitive strategies such as listing mistakes and sorting out language problems oneself (Item 3) and keeping a log of all course-based activities that have been completed (Item 9) were also used with medium low frequency.

The other cognitive and metacognitive strategies proved more popular among students. To a certain extent, this result mirrors that of Williams and Burden (2000) who found that students 'have various resources at their disposal and make use of them in different ways.' (p. 144). The results for Items 1, 2, 4 and 10 in the cognitive subscale (see Table 4) were evidence of the use of strategies that involve imitation which, according to Stern (1999b), is an essential skill for foreign language learning. Results demonstrated good use of listening and reading strategies as well as the manipulation of various sources, a skill which can help improve language learning. Items which related to other important elements of the language learning process such as attention to meaning, linguistic accuracy and stylistic appropriateness in speaking and writing (Ellis, 2005) were also widely used. In general, students used not only cognitive strategies which contribute directly to language learning but also metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, self-assessing, prioritizing and goal-setting to reduce the negative impact on their studies from factors such as shortage of time, lack of energy available for study, and separation from tutors and other learners. Yet, as regards noticing and dealing with errors (Item 3), students at all levels would do well to adopt a better approach in order to be able to learn from their errors. Logging course-based activities (Item 9) was another less frequently used strategy, which needs to be encouraged as it can help enhance planning skills, an important component of metacognition. Findings also suggested that there was no marked difference between graduates and 1st year students in the use of either the cognitive or metacognitive subscale. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether strategy-based instruction might further increase students' cognitive and metacognitive awareness and encourage them to try using a wider range of strategies and with greater frequency in their English studies.

As Stern (1999a) states: 'In spite of their limitations, good learners will tend to develop and use "communications strategies", i.e., techniques of coping with difficulties in communicating in an imperfectly known second language.' (p. 411) Being able to compensate for one's limited knowledge of the target language is conducive to reinforcing a positive self-image and

building self-esteem, which, it is argued, can facilitate learning (Arnold & Brown, 2000). In this respect, the performance of SRTVU students was satisfactory overall. Graduates made more frequent use of positive strategies than 1st year students who tended to use more negative strategies. In other words, distance English learning experiences do have a positive effect on the use of compensation strategies. Efforts should therefore be made to find out whether this is the result of instruction or related to the interplay of other factors.

Good learners 'cope effectively with the emotional and motivational problems of language learning' (Stern, 1999a, p. 411) because 'attention to affective aspects can lead to more effective language learning' (Arnold & Brown, 2000, p. 2). The findings showed that SRTVU students, especially the graduates, made adequate use of affective strategies although they might benefit from a better personal rewards system to help maintain their motivation. Persistence is another skill that they need to work to acquire, in order to cope with the difficulties inherent in learning in distance mode and to improve their learning outcomes. Overall, although there is still room for improvement, SRTVU students' use of affective strategies is encouraging, which, however, is out of line with the majority of other studies where affective strategies are used least of all (Oxford, 1990). This may be a result of the various different kinds of support on offer, including the availability of a personal supervisor whose main responsibility is to attend to students' affective concerns in a variety of ways: in addition to face to face counseling, students can easily reach their personal supervisor by phone, text messaging, ICQ, MSN, or email, etc. Another possible explanation is that the students are advanced learners, all of whom have learned English for years and are experienced in coping with affective obstacles. Also, it might be related to a well-known indoctrination practiced in China's schools that modesty is a virtue. Last but not the least, there is closer peer contact and student-instructor contact at SRTVU than in other distance learning contexts (for example, in the UK, see Hurd & Xiao, 2006); all the students at SRTVU live in the same city and therefore tend to maintain social and academic contact

after enrolling on the same course.

According to Williams and Burden (2000), 'Cognitive, social and emotional developments are seen as inextricably linked...' (p. 67). Social strategies were as popular as affective strategies among the SRTVU students. This may be related to their career experiences. For example, many students have to use English in their work, and are actively involved in authentic language use. It is highly likely, therefore, that, when faced with a real situation they will use a variety of social strategies, and this can improve their learning in terms of social interaction in the target language. In comparison with other strategies, taking the initiative and engaging in cooperative learning need strengthening. These two strategies are part of the social strategies package, and are especially useful for distance language learners.

All methods of investigating strategy use have their strengths and weaknesses. According to Cohen (2000), questionnaire surveys 'are not necessarily very informative about learners' strategy use.' (p. 25). On the other hand, Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) maintain that 'student-completed, summative rating scales have a number of advantages.' (p. 2). Moreover, there are other factors that may affect strategy use, for example, age, gender, motivation, personal background, and personality, etc. (Ellis, 1999b; Stern, 1999b). And to add depth to the quantitative findings from the questionnaires, it would be useful to elicit information for individual students through the use of qualitative research tools. Nevertheless, findings from this survey are encouraging and a good starting point for further research which could use the insights gained to focus more closely on intervention techniques for facilitating strategy development.

CONCLUSION

In the course of learning English at a distance, SRTVU students appear to shift gradually from dependence on teachers to more autonomy in learning. They use their own strengths to the full in order to adapt to the new mode of

learning. More specifically, they employ a range of strategies in many cases to facilitate their distance English learning, hence taking more responsibility for their studies. The experience of learning English at a distance impacts positively on the use of some strategies, or 'gives rise to the growth of metacognitive knowledge' (White, 1999, p. 38), which can serve as a useful starting point for learner training. Despite the fact that there remain some strategies in each subscale which could be put to more frequent use in order to enhance learners' strategy awareness, it appears that students at SRTVU do not conform fully to the traditional stereotype of the Chinese language learner perpetuated by previous studies. According to Liu and Littlewood (1997), Anderson (1993), Nelson (1995) and Song (1995) (all cited in Hu, 2005, p. 6), Chinese learners 'see knowledge as something to be imparted by the teacher rather than discovered by the learners', 'tend to show great concern for precision and for not taking risks', and 'typically base their judgment on logical analysis rather than on feelings and hence, prefer to take time to arrive at the correct answer and are uncomfortable when making guesses'. It is encouraging that SRTVU students do not match these stereotypes in a number of respects.

Small-scale as it is, the study extends our knowledge of Chinese distance English learners' strengths and weaknesses in using learning strategies and leads to some pedagogical implications for the design and delivery of distance-taught English courses in China's learning context. Informed by the findings, a pilot project is already in progress to implement strategy-based instruction at SRTVU. Specific measures are being integrated into the instruction of individual courses to train students in the use of relevant learning strategies with a focus on those which were rated to be of low frequency use. It is hoped that findings from the pilot project might reveal deeper insights into enhancing strategy awareness in China's distance ELT context.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank Ms. Yiwei Peng and Ms Yongsheng Zhang for their participation in administering the questionnaire survey and their assistance with statistical calculations.

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